

The Hermeneutic Imagination: Outline of a Positive Critique of Scientism and Sociology*

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*Josef Bleicher. Boston:
Routledge and Kegan
Paul, 1982.

What exactly is the hermeneutic imagination? A profound question indeed that provoked me to pick up this book in a bookstore several months ago. Now, having read Bleicher's *The Hermeneutic Imagination: Outline of a Positive Critique of Scientism and Sociology*, I must confess I remain unenlightened.

The book is notably dull, unimaginative, and replete with convoluted sentences and careless phraseology. One of the apparent tasks of Bleicher's critique

would necessitate learning processes in the sphere of the intersubjective determination of ends and purposes in line with the steady increase in instrumental knowledge. That the latter should have come to outstrip public control can be seen as symptomatic of the atrophy of the hermeneutic imagination which is being hastened by the encroachment of scientific rationality upon the communicative determination of a meaningful social existence. (p. 1)

Sadly, according to Bleicher, sociology has failed to counteract this development and rather has contributed to the demise of "communicative rationality" (p. 1). When these sentences, typifying much of the prose in the text, are decoded, I presume that Bleicher is in favour of "communicative rationality" and opposed to "scientific rationality"—although why the former is seen as intrinsic to the development of the hermeneutic imagination is not clear.

The hermeneutic sociology that Bleicher argues for and proposes as an alternative is a "demystifying secularized perspective on social processes which are seen as amenable to rational investigation and control" (p. 3). By locating hermeneutics within an admittedly critical but "rational" frame of reference, Bleicher fails to take account of the aesthetic-literary context in which hermeneutics is generated and continues to be explicated.

There is much about the meaning of science, the development of a positivist epistemology and the neo-positivist philosophy of "scientism" and its embeddedness in a socio-historical context (chaps. 1 and 2), but his discussion of these issues merely commits the fallacy of so many philosophers of human science—sweeping generalizations that dot the vast horizons of abstraction—linguistic "hermeneutic-babble" for which I, as one reader, have little patience.

The author states that his purpose lies

in *evidencing* the social, historic and metascientific meaning of science to consider the latter as a project sustained by on-going

processes of communication within and around it in order to dispel the self-misunderstanding of science which acts as a frame of reference for scientistic sociology. (p. 4)

Then, in order to analyze the impact of technocracy, he claims to “trace the operation of this dimension within science itself to counter the scientific self-misunderstanding of science and its sociological offshoot” (p. 7).

Yet Bleicher’s historical critique, after such grandiose claims, is a rather shoddy overview of classical and historical figures from Aristotle to Kant, mostly drawn from secondary sources so that the reader has reason to question whether he, in fact, has actually read Descartes, Bacon, Mill, Russel, Wittgenstein, et al. This is compounded by an inconsistent index. For example both Russel’s *Principia Mathematica* and Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* are discussed in sweeping terms, yet neither appear in the bibliography, and only Wittgenstein appears in the index. Other Classical philosophers such as Nietzsche are quoted, without citation, out of other books.

Given the non-substantive nature of the historical overview, the sweeping statements made by the author jar the sensibilities:

I will attempt the formulation of a hermeneutic paradigm—in opposition to the positivist one—which recognizes the hermeneutic dimension between subject and object to be not only reducible to, but also foundational of, the objectifying methods of scientistic sociology. (p. 49)

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These are laudable intentions but somehow don’t come to fruition in the book.

A far more readable text, written in clear prose, which attempts to analyze the role of sociology and the interpretive turn in social science, is Maurice Roche’s *Phenomenology, Language and the Social Sciences* published by the same press almost 10 years previous to Bleicher’s text. Here Roche presents a painstaking, well documented critique of the positivist epistemological milieu in which sociology was birthed and reared, as well as an excellent account of the Vienna Circle, conceptual analysis, and the “Verstehen” tradition—all of which Bleicher attempts to tackle but in the process he loses his way in the broad overreaching scope of the work.

However, an even greater problem with this work emerges in Bleicher’s misunderstanding of the genesis and context in which hermeneutics is called forth. The heart of hermeneutics lies in its aesthetic-literary domain and noticeably missing from Bleicher’s discussion is the realm of the poetic. Heidegger’s considerable influence on the development of the modern or new hermeneutic should be carefully examined in relation to “the hermeneutic imagination”—a reconceiving of the nature of poetry and the act of poetic speech as a

showing or revealing of things—where experience cannot be suspended or bracketed. This creates the hermeneutic circle that interweaves interpreter and text into a new unity, and it is through poetry, through drama, through the art form, that Gadamer explains this “fusion of horizons.” As Murray points out rather eloquently in his excellent book *Modern Critical Theory: A Phenomenological Introduction*

an interpretation of a work of art is a way of listening and response, of hearing and heeding what is said. Listening is by no means a merely passive state, for listening presupposes that we are in a listening situation and that we have properly taken it up as our own. (p. 71)

or later, “the interpreter as historian participates in a distinctive horizon of questions and experiences, a tradition, and to the co-related fact that the artwork throws open a future for man” (p. 83).

In this way a hermeneutic sociology grounded in the lifeworlds of its informants should produce as its text the “said” of discourse and action (Geertz, 1973), the living narratives of its actors played out in the social theatre of the lifeworld. The task of the interpreter is then to unravel the informal *poetics* of everyday life, and thereby to create *not* a paradigm of communicative rationality but, rather, to invoke a way of seeing.

References

- Geertz, Clifford. *Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- Murray, Michael. *Modern Critical Theory: A Phenomenological Introduction*. The Hague, the Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975.
- Roche, Maurice. *Phenomenology, Language and the Social Sciences*. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973.